

MARIA LOESCHNIGG, *The Contemporary Canadian Short Story in English: Continuity and Change*. CAT 7 (Trier: WVT, 2014), 381 pp.

In spite of pessimistic forecasts regarding the future development of the Canadian short story by the *Literary History of Canada* in 1965,<sup>1</sup> the genre has flourished in the intervening decades since the book's publication and has enjoyed ever-increasing recognition. In 2013, the Nobel Prize in Literature was bestowed upon a Canadian writer working solely within the genre,<sup>2</sup> thus also singling it out in the crowning of Alice Munro as the "master of the contemporary short story."<sup>3</sup> And yet, despite the publication of more than twenty books on Munro's short fiction in recent decades, the genre in Canada as such has hardly received comparable critical attention. Perhaps the abundant source material offered by its vibrant development since the "Canadian Renaissance" in the 1960s may explain the relative dearth of scholarly works comprehensively engaging with Canadian short fiction.<sup>4</sup> In the introduction to her contribution, Maria Loeschnigg stresses that the primary focus of some previous studies on the subject consisted of literary output up to the 1980s. Her own work endeavors to fill the gap that has opened in the interim, surveying the Canadian short story from the mid-1980s through the first decade of the twenty-first century. The result is indeed a very welcome addition to short story criticism.

<sup>1</sup> Carl F. Klinck, ed., *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Reingard M. Nischik, "The Noble Genre: Alice Munro Brings the Nobel Prize in Literature to Canada." Chapter 4 of Reingard M. Nischik, *The English Short Story in Canada: From the Dawn of Modernism to the 2013 Nobel Prize* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017), 71-84.

<sup>3</sup> See the citation of the Nobel Prize Committee.

<sup>4</sup> Yet see Michelle Gadpaille, *The Canadian Short Story* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988); Reingard M. Nischik, ed., *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007); and Reingard M. Nischik, *The English Short Story in Canada: From the Dawn of Modernism to the Nobel Prize* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017).

Loeschnigg, in the introduction, cogently embeds her book in the context of previous scholarship and pinpoints the major characteristics and structure of her own contribution. The approaches to important recent examples of the genre in Canada in the following seven chapters, as Loeschnigg herself muses, might indeed seem eclectic at first sight, ranging as they do from chapters dealing with a single author only (ch. 2), stories grouped by their authors' gender (ch. 3), stories colored by their regional setting (ch. 4) as well as by globalization (ch. 5), stories by authors belonging to one ethnic group (ch. 6), genre experiments and transgressions (ch. 7), and, finally, the hybrid genre of the short story cycle (ch. 8). Seemingly a mixed bag, this particular cross-section is nonetheless persuasive, focusing on essential aspects of the genre in Canada today: its leading writer Alice Munro (who retired in the summer of 2013, just before she received the Nobel Prize); the predominance—both with regard to quantity and to quality—of female writers of the genre in Canada; the importance of region and "new regionalism" in the literature of the second-largest country on earth; the globalizing aspects of literature in a country of immigration where the term "multiculturalism" was first coined in the 1960s and where this concept is even included in the country's constitution as pertaining to basic rights (see Section 27 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms); the relative prominence of Indigenous literature in Canada as well as of the special genre format of the short story cycle; and, finally, the formal innovations of the genre, as for instance in the hands of another master of the short story and, arguably, its most variable practitioner in Canada, Margaret Atwood.

Although competently drawing on theoretical concepts and addressing diachronic developments, Loeschnigg's focus is not on the theoretical aspects of the Canadian short story, nor does she aim at giving a literary-historical account of the genre. Rather, she approaches her treatment of the contemporary short story in Canada by offering a "cross-section of recent developments along narratological and thematic lines" (2), synthesizing analyses of more general formal, narratological, and thematic developments of the genre with close readings of selected contemporary practitioners in Canada, both well-known and lesser known. Outstanding writers of Munro's and Atwood's standing or excellent and well-

known writers like Carol Shields and Thomas King are thus addressed in various subheadings, while another asset of this book is the attention it pays to less well-known but also notable contemporary contributors to the genre. The choice to include new and non-canonical writers (Judy Fong Bates, Dede Crane, Michael Crummey, Debbie Howlett, Rachna Mara, Connie Barnes Rose, Shyam Selvadurai, Nalini Warriar, Terry Watada, and Michael Winter) runs the risk that they may not (all) stand the test of time; yet such an inclusion is necessary if the aim is to give a fairly representative view of the state of the genre in present-day Canadian literature. Even the expert reader of Loeschnigg's book will not only appreciate her treatment of established short story writers, but will most certainly also make various new discoveries in this well-written, well-structured, and well-argued account of contemporary Canadian short fiction.

Only a few chapters of this voluminous and dense book can be considered in some detail within the scope of this review. The acquisition of this affordable book by libraries and anybody interested in contemporary Canadian short fiction would be worthwhile even just for the contextualizations of the introductory chapter and particularly for the second chapter ("Alice Munro: A View of her Stories Published since the 1990s"). In light of the proliferation of books and articles written about Munro both well before and ever since she received the Nobel Prize, it is undoubtedly an accomplishment to add a new, knowledgeable, and illuminating chapter on Munro's more recent writings. This chapter thereby illustrates how apt it is to focus strictly on more recent works, beginning in the mid-1980s (or, here, 1990s). In this case, the concentration on Munro's late/r writing unearths—in accordance with the book's subtitle—continuing and likewise new trends in her short fiction. For who would otherwise have immediately thought of Munro as a writer of murder mysteries (30), which indeed crop up only in her later works, from *Open Secrets* (1994) onwards?<sup>5</sup> More importantly, Loeschnigg's very readable analysis elaborately demonstrates how in the format of what may indeed be called (unusual) "murder mysteries" Munro's genre-innovative narrative technique and her extraordinary poetics

<sup>5</sup> Alice Munro, *Open Secrets* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994).

of the short story approach perfection, with her "rhetoric of secrecy" (7) and "rhetoric of procrastination" (39), her "counter-realistic deep-mapping" (21), her increasingly "daring" (28) and penetrating look beneath the surface reality, her deferral of meaning, and, consequently, her refusal to believe in and cater to a single, simple solution, or, in fact, any solution at all.

Recent research in literary and cultural studies has taken up the quantitative and qualitative increase in output from writers with hybrid or bicultural identities, who write of the reality of many sizeable ethnic groups within present-day North American society. From an exemplary treatment of the Chinese Canadian short story in chapter five in the framework of globalizing tendencies to chapter six, which focuses on "The Native Canadian Short Story in English," the ethnic variety emblematic of the contemporary Canadian short story is thus an important point of departure. As its title indicates, the sixth chapter alone (like practically all of the others) covers a considerable territory, tracing the trajectory of the output of Indigenous short fiction. The chapter lucidly engages with essential aspects of Indigenous literature, such as its more recent move from traditionally oral storytelling to written English texts, assumptions of "monocultural exclusivity" of Native storytelling (158) and the accompanying question of the "appropriation of voice" (159), the striking diversity even within First Nations short fiction in English (160), and Thomas King's first categorization of such plurality into "tribal, fusalional, polemic, and associational" stories by Indigenous writers (160-62), later also demonstrating that King in his own highly varied short fiction oeuvre reaches beyond his own categorization, useful as it is. The following subchapter on the development of Thomas King's "shades of humour" (162) between his two short story collections must have been written without the awareness (due to overlapping production) of the first comprehensive survey of King's short fiction, published two years prior to Loeschnigg's book.<sup>6</sup> In focusing on humor "from lighter to darker nuances" (164) in King's short stories, Loeschnigg

<sup>6</sup> Reingard M. Nischik, "Wide-Angle Shots": Thomas King's Short Fiction and Poetry," *Thomas King: Works and Impact*, ed. Eva Gruber (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012), 35-54.

shrewdly narrows down her diachronic survey of King's short fiction to an essential narrative technique of Indigenous writing, which in her lucid treatment of the topic also allows for a presentation of King's variety of narrative modes, in particular his "written orality" or "voice pieces" (Teresa Gibert) with their specific linguistic characteristics, his humorous reversals of cultural appropriation (e.g., his irreverent treatment of the Bible), his trickster and his authorial stories, as well as his Native and white stories, always exemplified in perceptive readings of selected stories. The chapter is complemented by a section with detailed treatments of Drew Hayden Taylor, Lee Maracle, and Eden Robinson's stories and their "multiple Native voices," focusing on their narrative form and also on issues of Indigenous authenticity, which these stories uncover to be "often only a fascination with the exotic other" (197). In a final subchapter, Loeschnigg succinctly reconsiders definitions of Nativeness, warning with Kit Dobson of "the ghettoizing of writers into essentialized ethnocultural categories" (198).

Only few flaws are to be mentioned here concerning this otherwise thoroughly proof-read book. For instance, Ajay Heble is a male, not a female scholar (19). And is distinguishing between Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro really feasible in this manner: "Mavis Gallant was, above all, an international writer whose

immense productivity has maybe not so much influenced the Canadian short story of the last decades but rather the short story as a genre in a more global context" (18)? Is not a writer like Munro, who has even been awarded the Nobel Prize, also an international writer, forging the genre within a decidedly global context? Further, the text might have benefited from a shortening, or sometimes even cutting, of scholarly quotes, relying instead more on personally filtered references to make the writing occasionally less overwrought. This is likely a last residue of the particular species of postdoctoral thesis used as a basis for the present book ("Habilitationsschrift," accepted at the University of Graz in Austria), which is otherwise beneficial and positively shines through in the thoroughness and high level of research and argumentation.

In sum, Maria Loeschnigg's book is both elaborate and readable and will hopefully reach many readers. It is all the more regrettable that my copy quickly started to disintegrate despite normal use. A better binding and indeed overall presentation of a book (from size of font to cover design) is hardly too steep a demand of a publisher, especially with works demonstrating many years of intensive effort, great care and competence like this achievement by Maria Loeschnigg.

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